Teaching and Learning in an Online Degree Program: A Review of One Program[*]

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Abstract

This article reviews current best practices of online learning and teaching. Considerations to the following topics are discussed: What does it take to excel in the online environment? ; How are multiple intelligences utilized in the online classroom? How can learning objectives bet met by using best practices in online learning? How are the art of teaching and the act of learning online reflect the practices at the University of Illinois Springfield. The implications of online learning and its practical application to connect students with teachers through a global venue are explored.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Learning Online

Online learning continues to grow connecting students and faculty globally. Several areas should be considered when determining participation in an online degree program. Many teachers, as well as future administrators, are currently enrolled in or considering online programs. When reviewing programs for participation by either degree-seekers or continuing education-seekers, the following considerations are critical for student success in an online environment.

What skills are necessary for students and teachers to be successful in an online classroom? First, one needs access to a computer with Internet capability. This may seem to be a given, yet it continues to be an issue for some students and creates a digital divide between economic levels. Additionally, an open mind is critical to succeeding in online learning. A Socratic attitude creates an environment of positive inquiry.

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Students should have self-discipline and be self-motivated, and both students and faculty must be willing to solve problems at a distance and have a willingness to commit to regular communications. In addition, faculty must possess all the characteristics of an effective face-to-face classroom teacher. They must be supported through adequate training for the technologies being utilized and have access to appropriate technologies to teach their content in a quality, user-friendly environment. The effective online professor will believe that an online course is as effective as a face-to-face course.

Future trends and considerations in online learning environments include the continued enrollment growth and the ability to reach more students. There will continue to be more competition and perhaps less cooperation in the delivery of online courses. As is apparent in many fields, there is more acceptance and public support of online degree programs. Online programs and courses will continue to have increased accountability issues and will need to adapt to continuous changes in new technologies. Trends indicate that there will be additional standards and accreditation processes involved with the review of courses and programs. These processes will help define and continuously improve online offerings.

While many institutions offer online degree programs, potential students must weigh high-cost versus high-quality programs to make a decision regarding the best educational route for the individual student. High cost and high quality are not always compatible and students will need to be perceptive consumers of higher education to determine a program that is most closely aligned with their individual goals and needs.

Sociological & Technical Quality Considerations

Is there evidence within the program structure and specific courses of sociological support systems? There are several areas a perspective student should review when making a decision regarding program quality. One example would be whether the program allows admission to all students who apply or if the program is selective based on GPA and application materials. Programs that allow all students admission should be reviewed more carefully for other quality indicators. Another such indicator of quality is whether the program is supported by learning assistants or peer mentors. According to Twigg (n.d.), many universities have found increased retention and student support in classes assisted by peer mentors. Another consideration is whether the courses in the program are self-paced. Or, do they follow a semester structure? Research has shown that students need support and structure to succeed. A third indicator is evidence of high interaction among teachers, students, and peer mentors. This also includes individualized on-demand support. Technical support should be provided on a 24/7 basis to support students living in a variety of time zones. Instructional support should be provided by instructional staff in a timely manner that is consistent with both program and university policies. One additional indicator is the experience level and knowledge base of the faculty who teach in the program on a regular basis.

Online tutorials create an environment that allows students the opportunity to investigate and master the online learning management system and may include an orientation tutorial. In addition, other available online student services such as counseling, registration, bursar services, records accessibility, degree audit information, disability services, and career development services are indicators of a commitment to high quality by a university. In considering an online degree program, use of the student services via electronic media should be a positive experience prior to enrollment .

Quality online programs always use a course management system allowing learners to interact with the instructor, students, and student service support areas through a variety of venues. The course management system (CMS) may be any number of commercial or university-created courseware, but the common feature is that it is useable by the end user and creates a positive learning environment. Course management systems should include basic components of discussion or dialogue areas, access to syllabi and other course documents, course calendars with assignment due date indicators, access to grades, and access to library resources. Some CMS platforms allow instant messaging, chat rooms, automatic e-mail, whiteboards, small group communication areas, and internal testing systems, which can add to the functionality of the program . Any CMS should allow the user at the minimum level of connectivity access to all functions required in the course work. Connectivity may include access via a T-1, Broadband, Cable, or Dial-up. Additionally, the perspective student must be aware of firewall and other technicalities regarding personal computing devices used for coursework. Security authentication should be provided for any CMS through the sponsoring educational institution.

The considerations regarding current practices in online learning and future delivery methods of online higher education coursework have tremendous implications for current and future educators. An understanding of online learning processes, accountabilities, and best practices is necessary for both present and future K-20 educational leaders considering an online program of study, or when considering teaching in an online delivery format.

Online learning continues to grow connecting students and faculty globally. There are many options available to students today in the realm of online education. Many are legitimate and provide an option for working professionals who are not able to enroll in a program requiring significant traditional classroom attendance. However, there are many areas to consider when looking for an appropriate online format. Six components of online degree programs will be considered during this discussion.

First, the degree seeker must establish an understanding of the accreditations the prospective institution holds. Higher Education entities are accredited through a number of agencies. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is an organization that consists of approximately 3000 degree granting institutions of higher education and over 60 accrediting agencies . The CHEA can provide the degree seeker guidance in understanding the accreditation process and recognized agencies of higher education degree granting institutions by using a standards-based approach to recognizing accredited agencies. Additionally, institutions may also hold state accreditation and educational entity accreditation from organizations such as North Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

After accreditation has been determined, perspective enrollees will want to ask questions regarding accountability in the online classrooms in the degree program they are anticipating joining. Sample courses or syllabi may be available upon request. When reviewing the materials, the following items should be considered:

1. Is there accountability in online classrooms? Do students have specific deadlines and responsibilities? What are the responsibilities of the faculty? Will you be working with fulltime faculty as part of your program?
2. Is the course tightly connected to both theory and practical application? How is your experience as an educator utilized? Are connections to standards readily apparent in course materials?
3. Do the objectives align with the assessments? What is the scope and sequence of the activities and assessments of the course?
4. Are course evaluations completed by all students? How is the data used to improve the course? What types of improvements have been made over the past few years?
5. Are online and on-campus students held to the same standards? Are the same deadlines and same assessments used for the online classes as the on-campus classes?
6. Are the professors held to the same standards as on campus professors? Are professors highly-qualified?
7. Has the course been developed with online best practices in mind? Best practices in online education are available for review at http://otel.uis.edu/Portal/endex.asp[1] .
8. Are multiple methods of teaching being used? Do the methods used seem appropriate to enhance student learning?

In a study regarding best practices in online learning it is noted that quality is at least as important or in many cases more important than growth of the program . By evaluating institutional or faculty commitment to program quality, the individual considering enrolling in an online program may be better prepared to make an informed choice.

Learning modalities or learning styles is another consideration for those contemplating online learning as an educational delivery system. If a learner is more comfortable using an auditory style of learning, it is advisable to ask if podcasts, vodcasts, or other auditory teaching methods may be a utilized as a mode of instructional delivery. For learners who learn best through visual stimulation, online learning may seem to be the perfect answer. Other lifestyle and professional concerns must also be addressed, but visual learners may find that they enjoy the highly visual environment of an online class.

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[1] http://otel.uis.edu/Portal/endex.asp

Kinesthetic and tactile learners may also ask what types of manipulatives or hands-on activities will be utilized in the overall learning activities. Additionally, these learners may want to actively determine their own learning needs and negotiate with professors for additional learning opportunities that will provide them with a variety of learning experiences. All learners should understand their own learning styles and preferences. Students should develop an understanding of how curriculum and teaching methodology is associated with learning intelligences .

The individual learner must evaluate the skills necessary to succeed in an online classroom prior to enrolling in an online program. Many online programs will provide potential learners with information pertaining to the accessibility of a computer with Internet access, having an open mind about the online learning process, and possessing the self-confidence that will allow the learner to ask questions during the enrollment/admissions process, as well as in the classroom with the professor and fellow learners.

Perhaps one of the most necessary skills is the ability to self-motivate. The online learner will engage in an online learning community and should expect to be in the online classroom several times per week to check messages, announcements, read lectures, and participate in discussions. The online learner must demonstrate self-discipline and a willingness to solve problems at a distance.

Summarizing Palloff and Pratt , a high quality educational experience in an online format is achievable when the online learner demonstrates the skills noted above along with flexibility and the willingness to manage their own learning. Following the concepts of transformational learning as discussed by Cranton , the online learner becomes an independent learner who is responsible for his or her own learning.

1 Teaching Online

Teaching in an online format can be extremely satisfying for a professor as a means of self-expression. The on-line format is an instructional delivery methodology that requires skills that are different from those utilized in the traditional classroom setting. Online professors must demonstrate the excellence in the competencies needed including the willingness and ability to solve problems at a distance and the willingness to communicate with students daily. This communication must occur even during times normally considered off-times including weekends. Burnett (1999) states that professors should expect feedback from their students. This feedback will help the astute online professor continuously improve their courses. This interactivity is a key to online success. Great online courses have a high social dimension. It is possible for professors to exhibit a sense of caring, as well as a sense of humor. It is critical that institutions provide adequate training in the technologies being utilized for online course delivery. In addition to the technologies, it is also important that all professors understand the mission or expected outcomes of the educational program. This means that in addition to learning the technology and pedagogy, professors must also understand how their students learn and perceive technology (Moore, Moore & Fowler, 2006). Online faculty should ascribe to the belief that an online course is as effective as an on campus course, retain an open mind, and demonstrate a solid ability to be flexible.

2 Considerations of the future trends of Online Education

Continued growth in online learning opportunities will allow even the busiest educators to take part in graduate, post-graduate, and continuing education opportunities. This growth may lead to more competition and less cooperation between educational entities (Atkinson, 2001). In a study of 151 corporate executives, most felt online educational opportunities would continue to grow within their organizations as learning opportunities and almost half saw online education as effective as traditional classrooms .

Based on the trends in higher education today, the authors believe that it is very likely that continued accountability will be one of the most important components leading to the success and growth of online learning initiatives. As programs continue to expand, there must be significant discussions regarding high costs versus high quality. Quality must remain the paramount factor in any educational experience. The world of technology continues to change with the additions of new technologies. Those who have been

pioneers in online learning will need to remain flexible and able to change as technologies are introduced and adapted to the classroom found in traditional settings, or online.

Whether in a traditional classroom or an online classroom, the possibilities that technology will play in education are left only to the imagination. From web-based classes to using platforms interfacing with student information systems to virtual classrooms located in web space, such as Second Life, people from all walks of life will come together to learn. Whether through writing, through programs like Elluminate that allow people to conference in audio, or using avatars, the world is becoming smaller. There are developments being made every day that excite learners and draw them into universities half way around the world; learning-through-lecture days are becoming less the norm. Change is imminent.

University of Illinois at Springfield – One case

Research at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) indicates that some things should not change, at least not currently at this university. Dr. William Bloemer, Research Specialist/Professor Emeritus, Chemistry & Clinical Laboratory Science/Dean, (personal communications, 2006) Full-time, tenure-track faculty members teach UIS online students who transfer into the university with an average GPA of 3.4. Most programs have online coordinators, who support student learning from inquiry to graduation. Having tracked the online course completion rate since UIS began offering online classes in 1998, the percentage of students completing online classes remains consistently above 90% - hovering just a couple of percent below the on-campus classes. It has been found that student persistence toward degree completion is comparable between both online and face-to-face students.

Many of these accomplishments are due to the fact that faculty who choose to teach online are given the support and training needed to succeed. UIS is supported through the Office of Technology Enhanced Learning (OTEL) where professors and students can get the assistance they need with online learning issues. UIS enrolls almost 1,000 online majors and nearly 2,000 headcount students who are enrolled in at least one class online. Online students at UIS earn grades that are almost identical to those on campus; just 0.01 points below the campus average. The quality of UIS online programs, with small classes taught by the same faculty members who teach the analogous sections on campus, draws motivated and highly qualified students.

Conclusion

Technology will continue to change. The key is how universities choose to implement the change. If technological advances can be built on the foundation of a strong infrastructure with a committed human resource strategic plan, then change can affect positive success for students and faculty who engage in the online learning environment. The University of Illinois at Springfield is one of many universities who are modeling positive virtual environments by incorporating high quality programming through support for faculty and students in a variety of training, tutoring, and campus life activities. Continuous improvement of best practices that are currently recognized in the field will be necessary to meet the needs and demands of future trends in the delivery of online education.

References

Retrieved June 8, 2007, from http://www.collegecosts.info/pdfs/solution_papers/Collegecosts_Oct2005.pdf[2]

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[2]http://www.collegecosts.info/pdfs/solution_papers/Collegecosts_Oct2005.pdf